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Engaging in Environmental Governance in China: Self-Perceptions of Environmental Groups

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese government issued *the Guiding Opinions on Building a Modern Environmental Governance System* in 2020 reaffirming the importance of NGOs' participation in the country's environmental governance. This study explores the comparative advantages among different environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and investigates how they engaged in environmental governance under Xi Jinping's administration by analyzing the self-perceptions of environmental groups and the impact of their profiles on their work. A survey was conducted to assess these aspects. The findings revealed that government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and other registered NGOs faced challenges similar to those of the grassroots NGOs, and the comparative advantages of different types of ENGOs were not clearly defined. The majority of environmental NGOs identified policy advocacy and environmental education as the most effective means of raising environmental awareness. However, all types of ENGOs faced challenges related to staffing and financial support. The research contributes to the narratives on the engagement of environmental governance in China from perspective of environmental NGOs.

Keywords: China; Environmental governance; Civil society organizations; Source of powers; Self-perception

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1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of environmental civil society has played a crucial role in enhancing environmental governance in China in various ways since the economic reforms of 1979, and this phenomenon has drawn significant academic attention over the past decades (Yang, 2005; Ho, 2007). Environmental NGOs have contributed to improving governance by actively participating in processes such as filing open government information requests, which help make environmental information accessible to the public; engaging in environmental impact decision-making; advocating for progressive environmental policies; and initiating environmental public interest litigations. These efforts have increased transparency, encouraged public participation, and strengthened accountability in environmental management. The Chinese government has provided legitimate support to environmental NGOs to facilitate their contributions to governance. For example, amendments to the Environmental Protection Law adopted in 2014 explicitly recognized the legal standing of qualified NGOs to file environmental public interest litigations. Furthermore, in 2020, the government called for an enhanced role for NGOs in constructing modern environmental governance in China.

Since the economic reform in China at the end of the 1970s, the growth of social issues has led the Chinese government to think about the role of NGOs in the country. The blossom of civil society organizations, such as education, health, poverty alleviation and environmental protection, has spanned across various social issues in the early 1990s. They have made significant contributions to social governance in the country (Yu, 2016). In China, NGOs are required to register under one of three main regulations that define their legal status and scope of activities. The NGOs are divided into foundations, social organizations and private non-enterprise units. The state mass organizations or the governmental organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), such as All China Trade Union, are also included in the NGO category. Studying the Chinese NGOs, the relationship with the government has been highlighted. In this paper, we use nongovernmental organization (NGO) in general, but we addressed the differentiation between registered NGOs under the Civil Affairs Ministry or bureaus, including GONGOs, private nongovernmental enterprises, foundations, social organizations (such as environmental groups in the universities, though they have not included in this research), and grassroots NGOs which registered under business regulations in the country. As mentioned above, all NGOs should register under the Ministry of Civil Affairs and attach a sponsoring unit (*guakao danwei)* or "mother-in-law" in Chinese. The sponsoring unit ensures the newly registered NGOs abide by the law and all behaviour (Saich, 2000). Those NGOs cannot find a sponsor unit and are registered under business regulations, which are perceived as grassroots NGOs.

Compared to civil society organizations in the West, Chinese NGOs are characterized by their tendency to collaborate with the government and avoid direct confrontation or protests. Rather than adopting a confrontational or adversarial approach, they often take on a "facilitating" role in governance. For instance, while Western NGOs may actively organize or support citizen-led protests to advocate for policy change or hold governments accountable, Chinese NGOs have largely refrained from such activities in recent years. This distinction has led to debates about whether a "real" civil society exists in China, as traditionally defined in Western contexts (Ma, 2002). In China, NGOs often deliver social services on behalf of the government through contracting arrangements (Zhao et al., 2016). The government, in turn, supports these NGOs in performing roles that align with its policy goals and priorities, such as poverty alleviation, environmental management, and public health initiatives (Liu, 2020; Unger and Chan, 1995). At the same time, NGOs find security and sustainability by building alliances with state agencies and avoiding overt challenges to state authority (Hsu, 2010).

This collaborative dynamic has led some scholars to describe the relationship between the state and NGOs in China as a form of "state-led civil society" (Teets, 2013). While this state-NGO convergence operates under government control, it has not entirely stifled the development of civil society. Instead, it has allowed NGOs to contribute to improving governance quality, particularly in areas such as environmental protection, disaster relief, and social welfare. Unlike in the West, where civil society is often viewed as an independent counterweight to the State, the Chinese model emphasizes synergy between the two, prioritizing stability and governance over democratization. Consequently, as Teets (2013) argues, this model of civil society strengthens governance capacity rather than leading the country toward political democratization. By focusing on collaboration rather than confrontation, Chinese NGOs demonstrate a unique approach to civil society that differs fundamentally from their Western

counterparts. These differences reflect both the opportunities and constraints within China's political and institutional environment, as well as the distinct pathways through which civil society can contribute to governance in varying contexts.

In studying the NGOs, the representation of interests shall be highlighted. The interests are articulated by resources, which are shaped by the "profile" of the NGOs. Nasiritousi et al. (2016) explained that the "profile" of NGOs is comprised of different sources of power, different comparative advantages in the range of policy spectrum, and governance activities (Nasiritousi et al., 2016: 112). As mentioned above, the NGOs are identified in the context of China, representing different legal status and different power sources (Han, 2016). The governmental-organized NGOs (GONGOs) align with the ruling party's ideology or policy (Hasmath et al., 2019, p. 269). They can be seen as the external arm of the government (Wu, 2002), while the grassroots NGOs are facing a lack of financial resources (Shieh, 2017).

Previous study about Chinese NGOs mainly focuses on their roles in various policy spectrum and their autonomy as well as their limitations (such as Saich, 2000; Spires, 2011), but few discuss the sources of power and its impacts on their works, particularly state-affiliated NGOs. Wang (2022) examined a social enterprise with GONGO background as an example to point out the possibility of GONGO taking an initiative role in the social transformation. To differentiate the types of NGOs, this research used the sources of power and relationship with the state to examine the different backgrounds of these NGOs and to what degree they affect their functions and roles in environmental governance in China.

These NGO features also can be found in the environmental protection domain in the context of China. Hereinto, the environmental NGOs in this study indicate all kinds of environmental protection-related organizations in China. Studying the Chinese environmental governance being increasingly significant to the rule of government, examining the resources and levels of environmental NGOs and their perceptions across governance activities is essential, for instance, education, non-radical campaigns, and policy advocacy (for example, Ho and Edmonds, 2007; Tang and Zhan, 2008; Xie, 2009; Wong, 2021; Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

In examining the engagement of environmental NGOs in Chinese environmental governance, scholars have focused on the roles of environmental NGOs, their degree of autonomy as their limitations in environmental governance (for example, Liu et al., 2017; Morton, 2005; Su et al. 2022), and various relationships with different actors in the society, or generalize from case studies on one of the environmental NGOs. However, the discussion about the sources of resources and the level of engagement among different categories of environmental NGOs across the country is limited in the current studies, neither about comparative advantages of various categories of environmental NGOs. Thus, this study investigates: 1) how far the environmental NGOs engage in environmental governance under Xi's administration by analyzing environmental groups' self-perceptions, and 2) how NGO profiles affect their work in environmental governance. We use the term environmental NGOs, including GONGOs, foundations, private non-enterprises, social organizations, and grassroots NGOs to examine their comparative advantages in environmental governance activities. Also, this paper aims to understand the perceptions of environmental NGOs on environmental management and the ecology quality among different categories of environmental NGOs in the country.

To analyze different categories of environmental NGOs across the country by exploring their perceptions of environmental management and the quality of ecology in China, we take the concept of "governance profile" from Nasiritousi et al. (2016) to facilitate analysis of how environmental NGOs differ across categories and see how this framework works in China. The governance profile refers to a series of measurements showing NGOs' roles and their attributions in environmental governance. Both self and alter ego are the indicators of attributions (Nasiritousi et al., 2016, p. 112). Understanding the comparative advantages of different environmental NGOs for receiving recognition for specific governance activities, this offers a novel approach to the study of environmental NGOs in China, which case studies have to date dominated; it also enables a more systematic comparison of the sources of environmental NGOs and the relationship to the perceived roles of environmental NGOs in environmental governance in China. Although this survey does not represent the country's average environmental civil society, the sample is heterogeneous enough to capture respondents with different backgrounds and from most parts of China.

A survey was conducted to obtain 104 responses from environmental groups across the country between September and October 2019 as the data for this study. In the study, we demonstrate the environmental NGOs with different sources of resources, their roles and functions in environmental governance, and their perceptions of the government's performance in environmental management. After

we survey and give an overview on the literatures on the development of environmental NGOs in China in the last four decades, we also examined the differentiation of power sources among Chinese environmental NGOs and the links with governance activities in Section 2. Then, we present the research methods used in this study in Section 3. After that, the findings and analysis from the survey to show the roles of environmental NGOs, their perceptions of the country's environmental management, and whether the environmental NGOs have any comparative advantages with different sources of power. In the concluding section, we discuss the findings and possible implications for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEWS

The resources available to an organization, as staffing and its relationship with the government, are key factors that shape the power of effectiveness of NGOs. This study builds on previous research by exploring whether registered environmental NGOs have comparative advantages over grassroots environmental NGOs, and these difference influence their roles and effectiveness in environmental governance.

2.1 Sources of resources and relationship with the government

NGOs represent a diverse range of interests and discourses and are commonly categorized into three types: religious, Dunantist, and Wilsonian (Stoddard, 2003). Religious NGOs are those that integrate missionary work with their social service activities, combining their faith-based values with efforts to serve communities. Dunantist NGOs, exemplified by organizations like the Red Cross, operate independently of government interests, focusing on humanitarian aid and community welfare. In contrast, Wilsonian NGOs work to advance national interests, values, or agendas on a global scale. These organizations are often perceived as government agents, promoting policies or ideologies aligned with their country's foreign policy objectives.

Each of these types of NGOs relies on specific resources to support their activities. Religious NGOs typically draw on donations from faith-based communities, volunteer networks, and institutional backing from religious organizations. Dunantist NGOs often depend on international funding, such as grants from multilateral organizations or private philanthropists, as well as public donations. Wilsonian NGOs are frequently supported by state funding, as their missions are closely aligned with national policy objectives. While the sources of resources may vary, the effective mobilization of financial, human, and institutional resources is critical to the success of all three types of NGOs. This categorization highlights the diverse roles that NGOs play and the different strategies they adopt based on their objectives and resource bases. By understanding these distinctions, it becomes easier to analyze how NGOs operate within different social, political, and economic contexts.

The NGOs lack political power, situate power asymmetric and attain resources as a significant source of survival. It is believed that the resources of NGOs are mainly identified from political, financial, membership, knowledge and information (Gulbrandsen and Andresen, 2004; Betsill and Corell, 2008). These attributions of NGOs also can range from global to local scale. As such, the power-interdependent relationship in civil society organizations is controversial. The Resources Dependence Theory (RDT) suggests the power of an organization regarding decision-making and implementation (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Acquiring resources through interdependent organizational relationships (O'Brien and Evans, 2016) with cost-effective calculation.

However, the NGOs relied on resources from different sources, such as agencies and governments, leading to the loss of autonomy and legitimacy (Mitchell, 2012). For example, the extra conditions to NGOs obtain resources may undermine their autonomy (Mitchell, 2012). The NGOs become a subcontractor or get resources from government agencies, not only for survival but also to consider the agencies can reach the beneficiaries (Bebbington, 1997; Fafchamps and Owens, 2009; Fowler, 1998). The NGOs understand that they are not unable to get rid of the political context of government operations (Coston, 1998). In the study of O'Brien and Evans (2016), however, the relationships between NGOs and the funders can be determined by both parties' mutual boundaries and strategies (O'Brien and Evans 2016: 1416). Moreover, the interdependent relationship between NGOs and the funders is not only considered by the resource attainment but the benefits to the community at large (O'Brien and Evans 2016: p.1417).

Maintaining partnerships with government agencies is common in pluralist and corporatist states. Raustiala (1997) pointed out that the state-NGO relationship depends on the skills and resources (Raustiala, 1997, p. 720). In pluralist regimes, open competition is found to acquire more resources among the NGOs for affecting policy-making or expressing their interests in policy-making (Bloodgood et al., 2014). By contrast, NGOs are highly controlled and limited by the state in the corporatist regime (Heurlin, 2010, p. 222). In addition, the state recognizes only a singular, non-competitive and hierarchical order group of NGOs for exchanging political support (Schmitter, 1979, p.13). For example, in the ENGOs in the Soviet Union, their participation was manipulated to support government policy (Ziegler, 1987, p.xii–xiii). Given that, the resources are mainly in the hands of limited NGOs in the corporatist State. However, other discussions pointed out that the corporatist ENGOs took their comparative advantages to create a space of resistance against authoritarian rule and played a leading role in democratization (Peterson, 1993; O'Lear, 1997, p.276). This also leads to the discussions about the autonomy of NGOs in the corporatist authoritarian regimes. The discussions facilitate us to understand the different combinations of resources among NGOs and their comparative advantages through building governance profiles.

In previous literatures, the State has controlled the NGOs in China through various regulations (for example, Geall and Hilton, 2013; Spires, 2020; Xu and Byrne, 2021). In addition, the ENGO avoid participating in any environmental activism for considering the risk of repression (Wu et al., 2017). The autonomy of Chinese NGOs and their roles in the typical definition of civil society in democracies are in doubt. Still, many scholars see these organizations as NGOs (for example, Ru and Ortolano, 2009). The lack of autonomy among the NGOs in China regards pluralism as inadequate to understand the role of NGOs and the state-NGO relationship in China. Hsu and Hasmath (2014) addressed that the corporatist arrangement has incorporated the institutional mechanism in the government service. This article deploys state corporatist approach to see whether registered NGOs have comparative advantages over grassroots NGOs in environmental governance.

2.2 Resources and relationship between-NGOs and government in the context of China

Previous studies have extensively examined the classification and roles of Chinese NGOs (for example, Ho, 2001; Kojima et al., 2012; Ma, 2002; Schwartz, 2004; Yang, 2005). As discussed above, Chinese NGOs face significant challenges due to their limited autonomy and constrained resources. Current regulations restrict fundraising opportunities, which force NGOs to focus on politically neutral projects to secure external financial support (Zhan and Tang, 2013). Additionally, grassroots NGOs not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs face higher tax rates, further limiting their capacity to grow and operate effectively (Zhan and Tang, 2013). These challenges hinder the broader development of civil society in China, particularly for grassroots organizations that lack institutional support.

China's State-NGO relationship aligns with the characteristics of a corporatist model, as suggested by Kojima et al. (2012). In this context, the Chinese government has allowed the proliferation of NGOs primarily to serve state interests. For instance, the growth of environmental NGOs reflects the government's determination to position itself as a "greening state" (Ho, 2001). However, this relationship is characterized by co-optation, with NGOs often integrated into the State apparatus to support its goals, a dynamic uncommon in pluralized democratic regimes (Hsu and Hasmath, 2014). Despite these constraints, Chinese environmental NGOs (ENGOs) have contributed significantly to environmental governance at international (Betsill and Corell, 2001), national (Boerzel and Buzogany, 2010; Longhofer et al., 2016), and local levels (Li et al., 2018), showcasing their capacity to operate within the state-controlled framework.

To better understand the dynamics of state influence on NGOs, it is important to examine the role of GONGOs (government-organized NGOs). Naím (2007) highlighted that GONGOs function as agents of the state, extending its influence both domestically and internationally. For example, GONGOs serve as intermediaries to disseminate state policies, maintain political stability, and enhance China's soft power on the global stage. Their close ties with the government grant them access to institutional channels, global resources, and greater media visibility compared to grassroots NGOs (Cheong and Yang 2017; Li et al., 2017; Wu, 2013). This preferential treatment strengthens their capacity to deliver services and advance state legitimacy (Hasmath et al., 2019; Wu, 2003). However, GONGOs are generally service-oriented rather than advocacy-driven, prioritizing the government's agenda over independent action (Yu

et al., 2021). Their role as state agents raises concerns about their comparative advantages hindering the growth and autonomy of grassroots NGOs (Zhao et al., 2016).

The existence of GONGOs is not without controversy. Scholars such as Wu (2003) have raised questions about whether GONGOs should be transformed into more independent, registered NGOs to reduce their reliance on the government and foster greater autonomy. While GONGOs benefit from substantial resources and strong social networks, grassroots NGOs often lack these advantages, creating a clear disparity in their roles and capacity within the NGO ecosystem. In the following section, the survey results provide a detailed examination of the governance profiles of Chinese NGOs, highlighting their roles in environmental governance and their sources of resources. By analyzing these findings, the study explores how resource disparities and state influence shape the operations and effectiveness of various types of NGOs in China.

3. METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted between September and October 2019, targeting environmental NGOs with diverse backgrounds. A total of 104 responses were collected. The survey consisted of four sections, comprising 35 questions designed to capture a wide range of information. The first section focused on the background of the NGOs, including the type of social organization, group size, geographic location, primary environmental issues of concern (such as air quality, climate change, and biodiversity), methods of addressing these concerns (e.g., education, policy advocacy, and environmental litigation), and key challenges faced (e.g., staffing shortages, financial constraints, and lack of public support). The second section explored the NGOs' perceptions of various stakeholders — such as the public, the business sector, other NGOs, government officials, and the mass media — regarding their engagement with environmental issues. The third section gathered feedback on the perceived performance of environmental management at both central and local government levels. Finally, the fourth section examined the ways NGOs communicated their environmental protection messages to the government, including through policy advocacy, direct communication with government officials, and environmental litigation. This section also assessed the perceived effectiveness of key environmental laws, such as those governing environmental litigation and environmental impact assessments.

The survey employed a non-probability sampling method, as it was distributed directly to environmental NGO representatives during a training program. This approach allowed for focused engagement with a specific group of stakeholders deeply involved in environmental governance. Although the survey was conducted in 2019, the results remain highly relevant today for several reasons. First, while China's environmental governance framework has evolved in recent years, the structural challenges and opportunities identified in the survey — such as constrained civic space, reliance on government-led initiatives, and limited public participation mechanisms — continue to characterize the landscape. Second, the core dynamics of environmental NGOs' operations, including their relationships with government agencies and their strategies for navigating regulatory restrictions, remain largely unchanged. Third, pending legislation, such as the proposed Environmental Code and the anticipated National Park Law, explicitly considers the roles of NGOs in environmental governance. These upcoming legal frameworks are expected to institutionalize and potentially expand NGOs' contributions, making the insights from the 2019 survey particularly pertinent for understanding how these organizations may navigate their roles in shaping and implementing these new laws. Thus, the 2019 findings provide a foundation for analyzing the current and future state of environmental NGOs' role in environmental governance in China.

4. RESULTS

As shown in table 1, most of the respondents were members of private non-enterprise units (58.1%), and the respondents were mainly volunteers (44.8%) and project officers (39.05%) for the environmental organizations. The environmental NGOs in this survey were primarily registered in Fujian province (55.24%) and then Beijing city (10.48%). The training took place in Fujian province, which may explain the higher number of respondents from this region. The environmental NGOs were most concerned with water pollution (70.48%) and biodiversity (48.57%). At the same time, most respondents used in-depth investigations (70.48%) and environmental education (65.71%) to express their

environmental concerns. The GONGOs mainly used environmental education, in-depth investigation, and environmental public litigation to show their environmental concerns. Interestingly, contacting government officials or mass media was not a common strategy among the GONGOs in this survey.

Table 1: Frequency distribution table of the type of environmental organization

		Frequency	*Percentage*	*Valid Percentage*	*Accumulated Percentage*
Valid	Grass Roots NGO	13	12.4	12.5	12.5
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	61	58.1	58.7	71.2
	Foundation	7	6.7	6.7	77.9
	Social Group	14	13.3	13.5	91.3
	Government organized non-governmental organization(GONGO)	3	2.9	2.9	94.2
	Others	6	5.7	5.8	100.0
	Sum	104	99.0	100.0	
Missing Value	no answer	1	1.0		
Total		105	100.0		

However, a question was asked about the most effective way to show their environmental concerns with an ordinal scale (1 is the most effective, and 10 is the least effective). The respondents found the most effective ways were information disclosure (74.5%), information exchange (73.5%) and policy advocacy (68.6%). This finding was different from the existing strategy that the responding organizations used for their campaigns. In the performance of managing environmental issues at the central level, the questions were set on an ordinal scale (6 is the best performance, 1 is the worst performance); most of the respondents ranked 6 for sustainable development (33.73%) and ranked 1 for preventing and controlling environmental pollutions (22.83%). Local government performance in managing the environmental issues with an ordinal scale (6 is the best performance, 1 is the worst performance), the survey found the best performance was sustainable development (30.12%). In comparison, control and prevention of environmental pollution were the worst performance (22.22%). Moreover, the source of power among the environmental NGOs showed no difference in their assessment of various environmental management performances at both central and local governments. Using the chi-square test to examine the correlation between the source of power among environmental NGOs and their assessment of the performance of environmental management at central and local governments, the p-values showed >0.5, respectively for indicating that the relationship between the source of power among environmental NGOs and environmental performance at local and central governments was mutually independent.

Then, we used the chi-square test to examine further the correlation between the source of power among different backgrounds of environmental NGOs and their engagement in environmental governance, and two hypotheses were made as follows:

H0：There is no relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

H1：There is a relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

To identify whether there is a relationship between the type of environmental NGOs (dependent variable) and how the environmental NGOs bring environmental issues to the government's attention (independent variable). The results are as follows:

A. Education and training

To analyze whether the environmental NGOs have influenced the government to pay attention to environmental issues through education and training, the Pearson Chi-Square value shows education and training, and the type of environmental NGO was 5.603, with a p-value of .347, which > .05, indicating

that education and training and the type of environmental NGO are independent of each other and are not correlated.

Table 2: The Frequency distribution table of the approaches which environmental organizations bring government's attention

		N	*Percentage*	*Observed Value Percentage*
The approach which brings the government's attention	Education and Training	54	11.4%	52.9%
	Sessions	75	15.9%	73.5%
	Policy Advocacy	70	14.8%	68.6%
	Information Disclosure	76	16.1%	74.5%
	Participate in planning and environmental assessments	49	10.4%	48.0%
	Supervision of Law Enforcement	55	11.7%	53.9%
	Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations	64	13.6%	62.7%
	Civil Ranking	24	5.1%	23.5%
	The Other ways	5	1.1%	4.9%
Total		472	100.0%	462.7%

Table 3: The summary of observed value

	Valid		*Missing Value*		*Total*	
	N	*percentage*	*N*	*percentage*	*N*	*percentage*
Type of environmental organization * The approach which brings the government's attention	102	97.1%	3	2.9%	105	100.0%

B. Forum

In the Chi-square test, for forums and the type of environmental NGO was 4.619, with a p-value of .464 > .05, indicating that forums and the type of environmental NGO are independent and unrelated.

Table 4: Cross-analysis between type of environmental organization and the approach which brings the government's attention

			The approach which brings the government's attention									*Total*
			Education and Training	*Sessions*	*Policy Advocacy*	*Information Disclosure*	*Participate in planning and environmental assessments*	*Supervision of Law Enforcement*	*Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations*	*Civil Ranking*	*The Other ways*	
Type of environmental organization	Grass Roots NGO	N	5	9	9	11	5	7	10	3	0	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	N	37	47	42	43	31	34	38	16	3	60
	Foundation	N	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	0	1	7
	Social Group	N	5	9	9	12	5	6	7	3	1	13

	Government organized non-governmental organization(GONGO)	N	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	3
	Others	N	2	5	4	5	3	4	4	2	0	6
Total			54	75	70	76	49	55	64	24	5	102

Table 5: The Frequency distribution table of Education and Training and Type of environmental organization

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grass Roots NGO	8	5	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	24	37	61
	Foundation	4	3	7
	Social Group	9	5	14
	Government organized non-governmental organization(GONGO)	1	2	3
	Others	4	2	6
Total		50	54	104

C. Information Disclosure

The Pearson Chi-Square value shows Information Disclosure, and the type of environmental NGO was 5.856, with a p-value of .320 > .05, indicating that Information Disclosure and the type of environmental NGO are independent and unrelated.

Table 6: The Frequency distribution table of Information Disclosure and Type of environmental organization

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	2	11	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	18	43	61
	Foundation	3	4	7
	Social Group	2	12	14
	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	2	1	3
	Others	1	5	6
Total		28	76	104

Table 7: The Chi-square Test of Information Disclosure and Type of Environmental Organization

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	5.856	5	.320
Likelihood Ratio	5.716	5	.335
Linear-by-Liner Association	.001	1	.974
N of Valid Cases	104		

D. Participate in Planning and Environmental Impact Assessments

The Pearson Chi-Square value for participating in planning and environmental impacts assessments and the type of environmental NGO was 1.988, with a p-value of .851, which > .05, indicating that participating in planning and environmental assessments and the type of environmental NGO are independent of each other and are not correlated.

Table 8: The Frequency distribution table of participating in planning and environmental assessment and Type of environmental NGO

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	8	5	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	30	31	61
	Foundation	4	3	7
	Social Group	9	5	14
	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	1	2	3
	Others	3	3	6
Total		55	49	104

Table 9: The Chi-square Test of Participate in planning and environmental assessment and Type of environmental NGO

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	1.988	5	.851
Likelihood Ratio	2.011	5	.848
Linear-by-Liner Association	.000	1	.989
N of Valid Cases	104		

E. Supervision of Law Enforcement

The Pearson Chi-Square value for Supervision of Law Enforcement and the type of environmental NGO was 1.969, with a p-value of .853, which is > .05, indicating that Supervision of Law Enforcement and the type of environmental NGO are independent of each other and are not correlated.

Table 10: The Frequency distribution table of Supervision of Law Enforcement and Type of environmental NGO

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	6	7	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	27	34	61
	Foundation	4	3	7
	Social Group	8	6	14
	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	2	1	3
	Others	2	4	6
Total		49	55	104

Table 11: The Chi-square Test of Supervision of Law Enforcement and Type of Environmental NGO

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	1.969	5	.853
Likelihood Ratio	1.985	5	.851
Linear-by-Liner Association	.102	1	.750
N of Valid Cases	104		

F. Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations

The Pearson Chi-Square value for Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations and the type of environmental NGO was 3.234, with a p-value of .664 > .05, indicating that Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations and the type of environmental NGO are independent of each other and are not correlated.

Table 12: The Frequency distribution table of Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations and Type of environmental NGO

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	3	10	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	23	38	61
	Foundation	3	4	7
	Social Group	7	7	14
	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	2	1	3
	Others	2	4	6
Total		40	64	104

Table 13: The Chi-square Test of Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigations and Type of Environmental NGO

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	3.234	5	.664
Likelihood Ratio	3.277	5	.657
Linear-by-Liner Association	1.154	1	.283
N of Valid Cases	104		

G. Civil Ranking

Civil Ranking or "Popular ranking or unofficial ranking" (*Minjian paihang bang*) refers to a list of ranking that ENGOs create to assess and compare the environmental performance of different actors (companies or local governments) based on factors on environmental disclosures, corporate responsibilities, environmental impacts, sustainability and engagement of the public. In the findings, the Pearson Chi-Square value for Civil Ranking and the type of environmental NGO was 3.719, with a p-value of .591 > .05, indicating that Civil Ranking and the type of environmental NGO are independent and unrelated.

Table 14: The Frequency distribution table of Civil Ranking and Type of environmental NGO

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	10	3	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	45	16	61
	Foundation	7	0	7
	Social Group	11	3	14

	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	3	0	3
	Others	4	2	6
Total		80	24	104

Table 15: The Chi-square Test of Civil Ranking and Type of Environmental NGO

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	3.719	5	.591
Likelihood Ratio	5.927	5	.313
Linear-by-Liner Association	.094	1	.759
N of Valid Cases	104		

H. Others

The Pearson Chi-Square value for other ways and the type of environmental NGO was 2.654, with a p-value of .753 > .05, indicating that The Other ways and the type of environmental NGO are independent and unrelated.

Table 16: The Frequency distribution table of other ways and Types of environmental NGO

		Never	*Yes*	*Total*
Type of environmental organization	Grassroots NGO	13	0	13
	Private Non-enterprise Entities	58	3	61
	Foundation	6	1	7
	Social Group	13	1	14
	Government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO)	3	0	3
	Others	6	0	6
Total		99	5	104

Table 17: Chi-square Test of other ways and Types of environmental NGO

	Value	*df*	*p-value*
Pearson Chi-Square	2.654	5	.753
Likelihood Ratio	3.235	5	.664
Linear-by-Liner Association	.016	1	.899
N of Valid Cases	104		

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings showed that GONGOs and other NGOs, including grassroots NGOs, private non-enterprise entities, foundations, and social organizations in this study, have faced a similar situation to bringing environmental issues to the governments. Also, a question about what challenges the environmental NGOs face, such as lack of financial and human resources, lack of relevant professional knowledge and techniques, lack of government and public support, the status of the organization not being valued, and others, the respondents ranked lack of human resources (69.52%), lack of financial resources (64.76%) and lack of public support (56.19%) were the top three challenges that the environmental NGOs faced. Surprisingly, this survey revealed that the GONGOs, as well as other registered NGOs, faced similar challenges as the grassroots NGOs, which were lack of financial resources,

public support, and the organization's status not being valued. The survey did not elaborate on the causes of "the status of the organization had not been valued", but it can be interpreted that the society had not valued the status of GONGOs and the registered NGOs.

NGOs can influence the actors in governance in different ways (Balboa, 2018, p. 36), but the power of NGOs can be asymmetric in facing the government or the business sector. Civil society organizations are weak and constrained by the government in the context of authoritarian regimes. Their legitimate authority is mainly from the authoritarian government. As mentioned above, the Chinese government classifies civil society organizations into seven categories, and their legal status has to be gained from the government. We perceived the status of GONGOs would have more competitive advantages regarding resources and the relationship with the government compared to the grassroots NGOs in China. Though this survey cannot represent the Chinese environmental NGOs on the whole, we may understand the profile of environmental NGOs, which leads to comparative advantages in engaging environmental activities in the country from this survey.

In this survey, however, we found that the GONGOs and other registered NGOs shared a similar situation with the grassroots NGOs, and comparative advantages were not apparent. The findings revealed that the GONGOs and other registered NGOs deployed identical strategies with the grassroots NGOs to draw the government's attention to environmental issues. In addition, the GONGOs faced similar challenges that the grassroots faced. Contacting government officials is not the priority for expressing their environmental concerns among the GONGOs highlighted in this research. This challenges an assumption that the GONGOs have "privileges" in engaging in environmental governance. Zhao et al. (2016) pointed out that the GONGOs may hinder the growth of NGOs if they possess more "privileges" than the grassroots NGOs. Wu (2003) also highlighted that the Chinese government encourages the GONGOs to rely less on the government and self-sufficiency (Wu, 2003, p. 36), but supporting the legitimacy of the state and serving the government's purpose shall be retained.

While the findings have not shown the comparative advantages of GONGOs, possessing "intangible" resources among the GONGOs shall not be neglected. The GONGOs provide an essential role in providing an umbrella role for the registration of other NGOs and representing the victims in environmental litigation cases. For example, in studying policy advocacy in China, the GONGOs may have "benefits" with the government or agency through personal relationships (Liu, 2019). Notably, their "privileges" do not necessarily intend to bring any political reform, such as democratization, like other Soviet countries (Soltys, 2013 in the context of corporatist authoritarian China. The authoritarian State adopts either a co-opt or repressive strategy to control the NGOs.

The NGOs display various tasks in environmental governance. The NGOs have had similar roles in engaging Chinese environmental governance in the last three decades. In the research, the findings of a survey of participants in a training workshop for environmental NGOs investigate how perceptions of the roles of environmental NGOs differ across environmental governance in the context of China. This paper takes the Nasiritousi et al. (2016) framework and proposes the different governance profiles, particularly their power sources, may have various comparative advantages in engaging environmental governance activities. The framework provides a map to understand the division of labour among different environmental NGOs in Chinese environmental governance (Nasiritousi et al., 2016). We found that no single environmental NGO category is strong across all environmental governance activities. Though the environmental NGOs cannot cooperate in participating in environmental governance activities in the context of China, the result indicates that each category of environmental NGOs can function in most of the environmental governance activities as the civil society organizations in the democracies.

The results have several implications for understanding the governance profiles of Chinese ENGOs. First, the assumption that GONGOs possess overwhelming comparative advantages over grassroots NGOs should be reconsidered. While GONGOs may enjoy greater access to networks and resources, their operational challenges mirror those of grassroots organizations. Second, the reliance of all types of NGOs on government legitimacy highlights the asymmetric power dynamics within China's state-civil society relationship. This dependency constrains the ability of NGOs to independently influence environmental governance, even as they contribute to advancing environmental goals within the existing political framework. Moreover, while the Chinese state encourages the growth of GONGOs to support its agenda, this approach may inadvertently limit the development of grassroots NGOs, as

noted by Zhao et al. (2016). The coexistence of these two types of organizations reflects a tension between fostering a controlled civil society and enabling more inclusive governance.

This paper also identifies critical gaps in NGOs' perceptions of their roles and challenges in environmental governance. While civil society organizations in democracies operate under pluralist systems with open competition, Chinese NGOs navigate a regulated registration system that shapes their legal status and operational capacity (Nasiritousi et al., 2016). These structural differences underscore the need for further investigation into how governance profiles influence NGOs' comparative advantages in environmental governance. This study provides a foundation for understanding the governance profiles of Chinese environmental NGOs, but further research is needed to deepen this understanding. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with representatives from GONGOs, registered NGOs, and grassroots NGOs, could provide valuable insights into their roles, strategies, and challenges. Specifically, future research could explore: How do NGOs perceive their roles versus their actual influence in environmental governance? How do NGOs' resource dependencies shape their autonomy and strategies in engaging with the government and other stakeholders? What specific advantages or disadvantages do GONGOs and grassroots NGOs have in different governance activities, and how do these affect their contributions? To what extent do GONGOs and other registered NGOs leverage their relationships with government agencies to influence environmental policy? By addressing these questions, future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the comparative advantages and limitations of Chinese environmental NGOs within a corporatist authoritarian context.

In summary, the study finds that while GONGOs and other registered NGOs share similar challenges with grassroots NGOs — such as limited resources, lack of public support, and undervaluation of their organizational status — they also possess intangible resources that enable them to play unique roles in environmental governance. These roles, however, do not extend to advocating for political reform but are instead focused on supporting the state's legitimacy and advancing environmental goals within the existing framework. The survey provides a snapshot of the governance profiles of Chinese environmental NGOs, highlighting their diverse but constrained contributions to environmental governance.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATIONS AND ESSENTIAL ETHICAL COMPLIANCES

Author's Contributions (in accordance with ICMJE criteria for authorship)

Contribution	*Author 1*	*Author 2*
Conceived and designed the research or analysis	Yes	Yes
Collected the data	Yes	No
Contributed to data analysis & interpretation	Yes	Yes
Wrote the article/paper	Yes	No
Critical revision of the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Editing of the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Supervision	Yes	No
Project Administration	Yes	No
Funding Acquisition	No	No
Overall Contribution Proportion (%)	70	30

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Research involving human bodies or organs or tissues (Helsinki Declaration)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any human subject (body or organs) for experimentation. It was not a clinical research. The contexts of human population/participation were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or ethical obligation of Helsinki Declaration does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

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The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any animal subject (body or organs) for experimentation. The research was not based on laboratory experiment involving any kind of animal. Some contexts of animals are also indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

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(Optional) PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)
The author(s) has/have NOT complied with PRISMA standards. It is not relevant in case of this study or written work.

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To see original copy of these declarations signed by Corresponding/First Author (on behalf of other co-authors too), please download associated zip folder [Ethical Declarations] from the published Abstract page accessible through and linked with the DOI: https://doi.org/10.33002/jpg040202.